

FILM

A fairy-tale ending

Stephen Sondheim's great musical 'Into the Woods' has finally been filmed. **Kat Brown** reports

Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* and Disney do not make obvious bedfellows. With lust and tragedy at its heart – not to mention a very rude take on Little Red Riding Hood – Sondheim's fairy-tale musical is a long way from a U certificate. Yet here it is, the House of Mouse's American

Christmas Day release, arriving here in January. Of course, the involvement of three-time Oscar winner Meryl Streep, who plays the film's menacing witch, goes some way to explaining Disney's confidence in the production, not to mention the presence of director Rob Marshall, whose film version of the musical *Chicago* won

six Oscars, including best picture in 2003.

Nevertheless, *Into the Woods* is not exactly mainstream material. To the uninitiated: the musical, which premiered on Broadway in 1987, weaves together some of the best-known characters from the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales – Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel and Jack (of Beanstalk fame) – with three new ones: the Baker, his wife and their neighbour, the Witch, who has placed a curse on the couple which has rendered them childless.

Each character has a particular life wish they want fulfilled as we watch them journey "into the woods" to try to achieve them. By the halfway point all but the Witch have had their wishes granted. But Sondheim, who has never been one for easy happy endings, doesn't leave it there. The second half of the musical deals with the consequences of those "selfish" wishes, the fragility of romantic relationships, the death of loved ones and the yawning gulf between dreams and reality. In the process he creates a beautifully orchestrated, clever reinvention of familiar childhood stories, that stands as one of the most seductive and original musicals of the past 30 years.

"It is a very un-Disney film," Emily Blunt, who plays the Baker's Wife, told *Variety* magazine last month. "It is very funny, very human. I think kids will enjoy it, but there are very adult themes running through it."

And it's not just its adult themes that make *Into the Woods* a difficult sell for Disney. Its score, too, while featuring plenty of soaring phrases, and witty syncopation, is also notable for its challenging rhythmic patterns and dense lyrics.

All of which might explain why, despite the musical winning three Tony awards and enjoying successful revivals on Broadway and in the West End, nobody, until now, has attempted a film. (An adaptation with Goldie Hawn and Robin Williams was banded about through the Nineties but came to naught.)

It turns out, though, that the idea has been brewing inside Marshall for years.

"I've lived with it a long time," he says. A Broadway veteran, he saw *Into the Woods* when it premiered on



Broadway and choreographed a production early in his career. "I remember John [DeLuca, his business and life partner] turning to me and saying, 'You should really do a piece that you truly love,' and I love *Into the Woods*."

In fact, Sondheim has said he earmarked Marshall as the director of a future film more than a decade ago, around the time he won his best picture Oscar for *Chicago*.

Then Marshall heard Barack Obama speaking to the families of 9/11 victims on the 10th anniversary of the attacks and noticed that, inadvertently or not, the President had quoted lines from the show's central ballad.

"He said to them, in a very

compassionate way, 'You are not alone. No one is alone.'" Besides its themes of loss and uncertainty, the show's main message – underlined by the show stopper *No One Is Alone* – is about the importance of community.

"It's a scary world: there's always a giant out there in some way," says Marshall. "I knew when I heard [Obama's speech] that it was time for *Into the Woods*."

After directing a billion-dollar-grossing instalment of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* series in 2011, Marshall finally had enough clout to get *Into the Woods* made, and so he picked up the telephone to Sondheim and his writing partner James Lapine.

Lapine, Sondheim and Marshall cut a three-hour, two-act musical into a two-hour film script, and then presented a "workshopped" version – a read-through with

'Kids will enjoy it but there are very adult themes in it'

extra choreography and acting – to Disney in 2012.

The actor they chose, perhaps surprisingly, for the role of the Baker in that workshop was James Corden. Famous here as the co-

writer and co-star of *Gavin & Stacey*, he was virtually unknown in the United States. But his role as Francis Henshall in the National Theatre's play *One Man, Two Guvnors*, which enjoyed a successful run on Broadway, brought him to the attention of the *Woods* team and the actor auditioned in Marshall's apartment, singing *No More* and *It Takes Two* from the stage show.

"I didn't feel that nervous, oddly, because I wasn't auditioning for a big movie," Corden says. "I was auditioning for a workshop that would hopefully get a big movie made, and if that movie did get made I probably wouldn't be in it." Afterwards, Marshall promised Corden

that they wouldn't make it without him. "To my surprise and joy, he just stuck by me and flat refused to see anyone else. I'm incredibly indebted to him for that and always will be."

Marshall's close-knit company had to work hard for their film. Compared with *Maleficent*, Disney's reimagining of Sleeping Beauty, starring Angelina Jolie, which had a budget of \$180 million, *Into the Woods* had to get by on \$50 million.

Why was Marshall's film treated as the poor relation? "They just wanted to minimise the risk," says Marshall. "I wanted to make it, so I made it at that number knowing that we'd have a lot of work ahead of us but we'd

figure it out."

To make the most of tax breaks, filming took place in Shepperton Studios outside London. But before that, there were six weeks of rehearsals – unheard of for cinema. "One of the things that saved us was rehearsals," says Marshall. "It was invaluable, actually."

As soon as those rehearsals finished and filming began, the rumours began to swirl. *Into the Woods* has a vast, devoted fan base. Followers dress up as characters from the show, write "fan fiction" online and produce art inspired by the story. And they were convinced Disney was intent on, well, Disneyfying the production.

When Sondheim was quoted in June saying that the studio had removed two of the darker aspects of the plot – the death of Rapunzel and Prince Charming's extramarital affair with the baker's wife – the *Woods* community exploded (even though Sondheim insisted he had been misquoted).

"I don't understand this," wrote one fan on *Entertainment Weekly's* PopWatch blog. "If Disney really wanted a film musical about classic fairy tales, why not do it from scratch? I mean, why take *Into the Woods* and excise from it the elements that make it a unique property? No sexy witch, no Rapunzel tragedy, no horny wolf... why call it *Into the Woods* then?"

Marshall calmly bats away such concerns.

"The rumours were crazy on this thing, ridiculous," he says. "The thing is, if myself and James Lapine and Steve Sondheim aren't going to be the ones to be protective and careful about all the decisions, I don't know who else would be."

But did he feel any pressure from Disney when it came to the storylines?

"I felt none of that from anybody. It was really my own vision. They supported my vision. I never had anybody saying no this, no that, do this, do that. Never."

Nevertheless, at an awards campaigning lunch in early December, Blunt admitted that "there was a little fear on Disney's side" about the Prince Charming infidelity scene.

"We fought hard to have it in there," she said. "I don't think it was ever going to be cut, but there was some dragging of feet."

The scene and its beloved song, *Any Moment*, remain, although in a rather more chaste form than they appear on stage.

Anna Kendrick, who plays Cinderella, is also famous for her role as Jessica in the *Twilight* films and knows a thing or two about devoted fans.

"In *Twilight* I was lucky because I was one of the characters that no one seemed to have an opinion on," she says. "This was the first time that I felt the pressure, like 'She's going to mess it up' or 'She can't sing in that register'."

"People say 'Rapunzel

FILM



Hoodwinked: James Corden as the Baker and Lilla Crawford as Red Riding Hood, above. Meryl Streep as the Witch, left

doesn't die in this one' and you think, 'You don't know that.' I think that you feel the threat of the entire kingdom even if you don't see it."

In this writer's opinion, Marshall's edits work. The film is undeniably more family-friendly than the stage version. *Hello Little Girl*, the song delivered by the Wolf (Johnny Depp) to Red Riding

Hood, is less lascivious. But I was too rapt to care. The only part I really missed was the reprise of the two Princes' gloriously hammy song, *Agony*.

"There is not another director in the world that could pull this off," says Corden. "I think that what he's done is far greater than you can imagine. I can't work out how he has taken a show

that people adore and are passionate about, and he's taken an hour out, and it feels like nothing has gone. There's nobody like him."

"I would just caution [fans] to know that you can't take a stage piece as it is and put it on film," Marshall adds separately. "That's happened before. I won't cite examples but I think we know the ones where they haven't reimagined them enough and that's the biggest disservice you can do."

Any adaptation will struggle, of course, to please all of the fans all of the time, but there is no doubting Marshall's commitment to his version of *Into the Woods*. He feels sure too that Walt Disney himself would approve. "He was such a forward thinking genius that he would have been thinking, how else could we tell these tales and relate to a modern audience," says Marshall. "I think he would have loved this."

● *Into the Woods* opens in cinemas on January 9

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